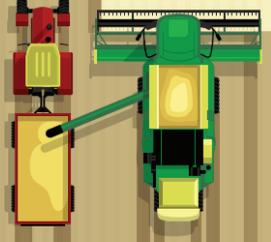


THE FARM-WILDLIFE-ACCESS BILL



An essential investment in rural America's agricultural producers and grassland wildlife.



BY ANDREW MCKEAN

You don't have to be a Montana farmer or rancher to benefit from the gargantuan federal Farm Bill, which directs national agricultural and food policies in five-year intervals. Up for reauthorization by Congress this fall, the Farm Bill also provides access for hunters and habitat for nearly every species of central and eastern Montana flora and fauna, especially grassland cover for upland birds and wetlands for waterfowl.

The vast majority—some 76 percent—of Farm Bill funding goes to national nutrition programs like school lunches and low-income food assistance. Only about 7 percent is devoted to conservation. But that infusion of funding has an outsize effect in Montana.

As its name implies, the Farm Bill is intended to help agricultural producers. In Montana, that translates to around \$1 billion each year in crop insurance subsidies and incentives for farmers doing things deemed in the national interest, like reducing soil erosion, planting flowering plants that attract pollinators, and conserving species-

rich riparian habitat.

Payments that flow to Montana's grain, forage, and livestock producers—who receive about a third of their income through Farm Bill components—go a long way toward helping keep farmers and ranchers on the land. The bill's conservation provisions do the same for deer, elk, pronghorn, grouse, and waterfowl.

If you're like most Americans, the massive \$1.4 trillion, thousand-page bill is so complicated, opaque, and full of acronyms that it's all but impossible to comprehend. Fortunately, staff with conservation nonprofit groups like Pheasants Forever and state wildlife agencies like Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks read the fine print. The word from these experts is that the benefits in the latest iteration will continue to enhance your hunting, fishing, and wildlife watching through 2028.

Like most legislation, the final version of the 2023 Farm Bill won't be determined until its final hours, but many provisions have been discussed, debated, and refined over the past year, providing a good look at the big pieces. What follows here is an overview of the components of the 2023 Farm Bill that will significantly affect Montana hunters and other wildlife fans.

Andrew McKean is the hunting editor of Outdoor Life. He lives with his family on a small ranch near Glasgow.

PRIVATE-LAND ACCESS

FWP's Block Management Program provides hunters with access to several million acres of private property. The amount of public hunting access to Montana farm- and ranchland made possible through a key federal Farm Bill program can't compare in total acreage, but it's definitely significant.

Shorthanded to VPA-HIP, the Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentive Program provides a slug of federal funds—nearly \$4 million over the past 10 years for Montana alone—that states use to expand hunting, fishing, and other recreational access to fields and pastures. The program, administered by FWP here in Montana, allows landowners already participating in the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) to make an additional \$5 per acre per year if they manage their CRP in ways that benefit grassland wildlife and they allow free public game bird hunting.

Since 2012, VPA-HIP funds have helped FWP enroll nearly 76,000 acres of CRP in its Open Fields Program, with landowners providing over 150,000 acres of access to bird hunters. Contracts average eight years.

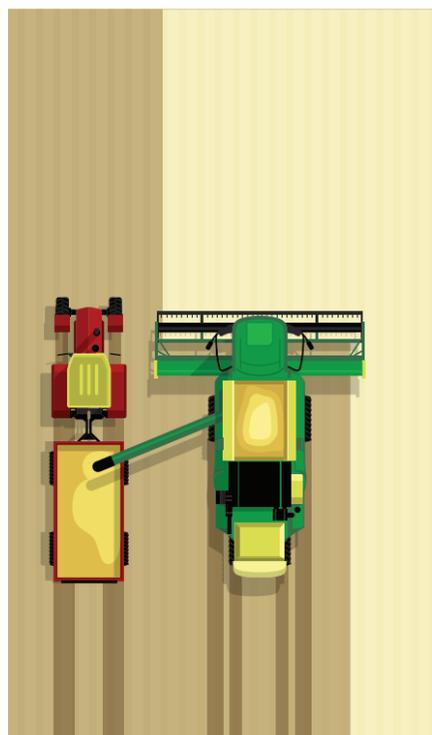
"The point is to have high-quality game bird hunting opportunity on land already enrolled in CRP," says Heather Harris, FWP's wetland/grassland coordinator and the agency lead on Farm Bill provisions.

The 2023 Farm Bill seeks to triple the national investment in access from \$50 million in 2018 legislation to \$150 million. This means Montana's share of VPA-HIP could increase significantly over the next few years. That excites Harris, especially the habitat-incentive portion of the program that provides for additional hunting opportunities. "We've been focused on access through Open Fields, which is good," she says, "but the ability to incentivize habitat improvement would allow for quality hunting while also helping farmers and ranchers diversify their operations. So we're hoping this is a priority in the new Farm Bill."

CONSERVATION RESERVE PROGRAM

CRP is one of the best-known and most substantial Farm Bill conservation "titles," or major components. Introduced in 1985 and reauthorized in every bill since, it provides incentives for producers to "retire" erosion-

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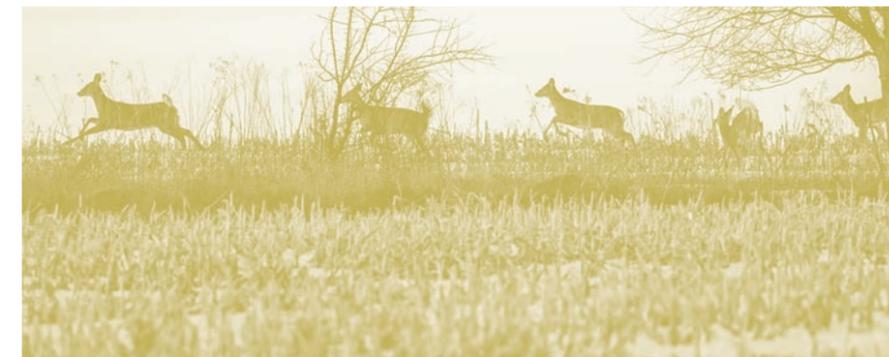
prone farmland for 10 or 15 years, planting perennial grasses instead of annual crops. The tall vegetation not only holds soil but also provides habitat for grouse, pheasants, upland whitetails, and nesting waterfowl. In Montana, CRP-enrolled land has fluctuated from more than 4 million acres in the 1990s to less than 2 million acres in 2020, when 750,000 acres of Montana's CRP were not re-enrolled largely because payments for conservation hadn't kept pace with rising commodity prices.

In many states, landowners who can lease their irrigated fields for up to \$200 per acre each year to grain-farming neighbors aren't excited by the \$80-per-acre lease rate for CRP enrollment, especially since CRP contracts require a 10- to 15-year commitment. (Montana lease rates averaged \$104 per acre in 2022.) Consequently, CRP acreage has slipped nationally from around 37 million in the first decade of the 21st century to around 20 million in 2021. Grain prices are spiking because of the war in Ukraine and global weather events, which means that a big increase in CRP acres is unlikely anytime soon.

"You see this pendulum swing, with times of high commodity prices making CRP unattractive, followed by depressed markets and greater interest in CRP" by farmers, says Jim Inglis, director of governmental affairs for Pheasants Forever.

"We'd like to see CRP restored to high levels, but we can't go to Congress right now and ask for 40 million acres," Inglis adds. "So we're going to request as many acres as possible, but with management flexibility that makes it appealing to landowners looking for alternatives to row crops that can make their operations more resilient during these wide swings in weather events that they've been experiencing."

The CRP Improvement Act is a provision in the Farm Bill that would modernize this cornerstone of grassland and soil conservation. If it makes it into the final version, the act would provide cost-share funds for fencing and water projects on CRP grasslands to make grazing—which, when done right, can invigorate prairie vegetation—a more appealing option for landowners. The act would also increase maximum CRP payments from \$50,000 to \$125,000 to keep pace with



rising farmland rental rates and values. And it would help producers restore wetlands, trees, and other critical habitat components as part of their CRP enrollment.

In Montana, CRP revisions would also target producers whose grasslands benefit migratory big game species like elk and pronghorn. Additional funding is earmarked to conserve grasslands in the Upper Clark Fork River Basin to improve habitat for aquatic and terrestrial wildlife and reduce sediments, nutrients, and agricultural runoff entering the river and its tributaries.

WORKING LANDS FOR WILDLIFE

Another acronym funded by the Farm Bill is EQIP, the Environmental Quality Incentives Program. It's designed to help farmers, ranchers, and forest owners integrate conservation into working lands and seems tailor-made for Montana.

Administered by the federal Natural

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Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), which has an office in every Montana county, the program identifies specific local conservation needs, then directs funding to address them. Examples include technical assistance to reduce soil salinity in areas with intensive grain production, seeding subsidies to increase pollinator plantings, and incentives to conserve large blocks of

sagebrush to benefit sage-grouse.

FWP's Harris encourages landowners and conservationists to contact and work with local NRCS offices to identify local priorities. These ideas are then converted into long-range Targeted Implementation Plans (TIPS) that receive Farm Bill funding.

Such on-the-ground, focused conservation planning not only helps Montana hunters, ranchers, and farmers but also helps sell the Farm Bill to a Congress that's losing its appetite for big public expenditures, Inglis says.

"We think it makes sense to talk about the Farm Bill as an investment in rural America," he says. "It's both an economic and ecological safety net for producers, and it makes landscapes more resilient to drought, flooding, and market fluctuations. Plus, every dollar spent by the Farm Bill's conservation components is amplified about seven times, so it's also good for rural economies." Not to mention, of course, rural wildlife. 🐾